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DEPARTMENT FOR NEA/ELA, AF/E (SKORUPSKI), AMMAN FOR FREDERIC

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TAGS: [PREF](#) [PREL](#) [PGOV](#) [ER](#) [SU](#) [EG](#)
SUBJECT: EGYPT AND REFUGEES: "WE CANNOT AFFORD TO BE A
STEPPING STONE TO THE WEST"

REF: A. CAIRO 1651
[1](#)B. CAIRO 1231
[1](#)C. CAIRO 965

Classified By: Minister Counselor for Economic and Political Affairs
William R. Stewart for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

[1](#)1. (S) Summary: Deputy Assistant Foreign Minister Tarek el-Maaty told us that Egypt is searching to find the best approach to dealing with its refugee problems, and does not want to be seen as a "stepping stone" to the West. Recently, there has been an upsurge in shootings at the border as Egypt grapples with implementing effective border procedures to deal with the growing migrant issue. We expect short-term pressure on the Government of Egypt (GOE) to increase with Israel's new policy of "hot returns" of African migrants that crossed the Egypt-Israel border. End Summary.

[1](#)2. (C) Egypt is experiencing an influx of Eritrean and Somali migrants, some of whom register as refugees, and others transiting the country to Israel. The GOE, constrained by its own lack of resources, is looking to either resettle the refugees or return them to their country of origin. Tarek el-Maaty, the Deputy Assistant Foreign Minister for Refugees, on August 25 lamented that Egypt is in a difficult position with refugees because there are only two options for dealing with them: resettlement in a third country, or return to their country of origin. Cairo considers migrants, who transit the country, attempting to illegally cross Egypt's border with Israel, to be criminals. If captured, the migrants are put into prison.

[1](#)3. (C) El-Maaty said that the GOE prefers third-country resettlements, but it wants to keep such actions quiet. Paradoxically, he noted "if refugees are resettled in third countries, it will encourage future refugees," but, "if we send them back to their countries of origin then Egypt attracts international condemnation." He said that Egypt cannot afford to keep the refugees because it has limited resources, and an indigenous population of which half lives in poverty. El-Maaty told us that the GOE is trying to work with the UNHCR on refugee issues, and pointed out that Egypt has a higher cooperation ranking with UNHCR than Jordan, Lebanon, Sudan, and Syria. However he underscored that Egypt does not want to be seen as a "stepping stone" to the United States or any other western country.

[1](#)4. (C) Katharina Lumpp, the Deputy Regional Representative of the Cairo office of the UNHCR, on September 3 told us that the characteristics of Egypt's refugees are changing. She explained that in mid-2007, 95% of the refugees and asylum seekers in Egypt came legally across the borders, and about 80% were Sudanese. However, she added a good portion of current migrants are from Eritrea and Somalia, and are

crossing illegally into Egypt. According to the UNHCR, the number of Eritrean refugees has increased by nearly 50 percent in the past 8 months, and by over 180% in the past 17 months. Still, Eritrean refugees currently account for only 4 percent of the refugees in Egypt, according to UNHCR.

15. (C) El-Maaty and Lumppp agreed that many Eritreans that enter Egypt do not come to UNHCR to apply for refugee status, but instead, seeking employment, they try to cross the border in Sinai illegally into Israel, which "makes them criminals, not refugees," according to el-Maaty. African migrants, captured attempting to cross into Israel, are tried in Egyptian military courts, fined, and sentenced to a one-year prison term. Members of the Eritrean community in Cairo recently notified us that approximately 300 Eritreans are nearing the end of their one-year sentences, and fear that they will be forcibly repatriated to Eritrea. Lumppp said that she heard many of these Eritreans have been photographed for travel document purposes, similar to the Eritreans who were forcibly returned from Egypt in June (reftel B).

Africans Shot at the Border

16. (C) We expressed our concern to el-Maaty about repeated press reports of African migrants being shot by Egyptian security forces at the Egypt-Israel border, and stated that the U.S. is opposed to the use of lethal force in these cases. He stated that Egypt, under UNSCR 1373, was allowed to secure its borders against those entering and leaving the country illegally, and stated that the GOE viewed these actions as an "anti-terrorism measure." El-Maaty explained to us the procedures for border police in dealing with persons crossing illegally into Israel. First, border guards

are instructed to warn the individuals by megaphone, telling them to stop. Second, guards are trained to shoot in the air. Third, guards are told to shoot the people in the legs.

El-Maaty explained that the Bedouin smugglers instruct the African migrants not to stop for the border guards, and assure the migrants that the Egyptians guards will not shoot them. He said that this has changed the Egyptian approach. "It is no longer feasible just to shoot in the air."

El-Maaty said that Egypt's plan for dealing with African migrants and asylum seekers was to try to work with the UNHCR, and relevant governments such as Sudan, Eritrea and Ethiopia. Egypt is also arresting the smugglers, which come not only from Egypt, Sudan and Eritrea, but also from Moldova and China.

17. (S) Comment: El-Maaty is under considerable pressure to get refugees out of the country either through resettlement to a third country, or repatriation back to the country of origin. He proudly told us that he has been able to resettle or return over 2,200 refugees since January 2007. We have consistently expressed to el-Maaty the USG view that the that the GOE should honor its international commitments to protect refugees. We have also advised him that Eritreans have a reasonable fear of persecution upon returning to Eritrea, and we have asked that they not be forcibly repatriated. However, we expect the pressure on the GOE to increase, in the short-term, because Israel has initiated a policy of "hot returns" of African migrants that crossed the Egypt-Israel border, and the prison sentences of many Eritrean migrants are set to expire. El-Maaty told us that Egypt appreciated U.S. assistance in resettling some of the Eritrean refugees, and asked if we could do anything to speed up the resettlement process, and increase the numbers we are willing to accept.

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